Stakeholder input on UN Human Rights office study on climate change impacts and the human rights of older persons

**Provided by Larraine J Larri**

**Researching Nannagogy: A Case Study Celebrating Women in Their Prime Crafting Eco-activism**

**DOCTORATE of PHILOSOPHY (EDUCATION) CANDIDATE**

**RESEARCH FELLOW, THE CAIRNS INSTITUTE**

[**https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1593-2463**](https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Forcid.org%2F0000-0002-1593-2463&data=04%7C01%7Clarraine.larri%40my.jcu.edu.au%7C3ceda18c021d40e0b72008d897654202%7C2eba4cf8af764db3bcaf81b5592535ef%7C0%7C0%7C637425808463835957%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=Jy%2BvlYtyMEfdu49KXgoG%2Bb%2Fwtui7ghl0ebCDVWta5%2F8%3D&reserved=0)

# Introduction

My sincere thanks to the Climate Change and the Environment (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights) for this opportunity to contribute input to your policy framework on climate change impacts and the human rights of older persons. I have framed my input in three sections. The first section outlines my field of expertise through my PhD research in older women’s environmental activist learning. I hope that it will also provide useful references to inform your work as well as contextualising my suggestions which is in the second section. The third and final section is my main recommendation for the policy framework.

# Field of expertise

My research focuses on older women’s informal learning processes through environmental activism in Australia. Very little is known about older women’s activism and yet women are credited with being at the forefront of environmental movements. It is assumed but not verified that women of all ages have engaged in activism. In particular, they are seen as agents for change in mitigating the impacts of global warming[[1]](#footnote-1).

Through the case study of the Knitting Nannas Against Gas and Greed (aka KNAG or the Nannas) the research explores the intersection of environmental activism, gender and ageism as KNAGs learn through experiences by crafting their eco-activism and challenging the place of ageing women in society. Data were collected from active KNAG members through surveys, interviews, and social media analysis. The Nannas consider me to be an “Honorary Nanna”. This has enabled me to document my experiences with them over the last four years by using autoethnography. The findings answer 1) Why the women became active as KNAGs; 2) What that activity involves; and 3) What and how they have learnt through becoming anti-fossil fuel activists. For many of the women becoming and being a KNAG has been a transformational process that they acknowledge has contributed to well-ageing.

The focus is on processes of transformative learning in order to understand how the Nannas shift in their journey from typical stereotypes of older women - invisible, infirm, voicelessness and relegated to domestic duties to having an increasingly significant and public role of active citizenship and raising awareness of what they consider to be the toxic and unsustainable impacts of fossil fuels. KNAGs determinately voice their concerns for intergenerational climate justice. They have grown from one group (which they call ‘Loop’) in 2012 to over 40 in 2021, predominantly in Australia but there are some loops in USA and UK. In so doing, they have become part of the larger transition movement working towards low-carbon futures.

I use the term ‘Nannagogy’ - a neologism I coined in 2016 to describe the innovative informal adult learning enacted by KNAGs (Larri and Newlands, 2017; Larri and Whitehouse, 2019). Nannagogy honours a tradition of older women’s wisdom translated into social action. Nannagogy is inventive, effective, collective, connected and very public. In theoretical terms, Nannagogy is a hybrid form of lifelong / later-in-life learning and a multifaceted combination of informal and non-formal learning understood through the lens of Social Movement Learning Theory (SMLT). SMLT exists through the intersection of Adult Learning Theory and Social Movement Theory (Hall and Clover, 2005; Hall et al, 2006; Scandrett et al, 2010; Kluttz and Walter, 2018). There is an important distinction between education and learning. Education refers to systems of instruction involving both teaching and learning and is found in formal settings such as school, colleges or universities. Learning is the process of knowledge and skills acquisition. Public awareness raising and information campaigns are often referred to as ‘education’ but this is a misnomer. Nannagogy is an act of radical older adult learning that has its antecedents in feminist collective learning strategies such as consciousness raising as well as the non-formal education strategies of Situated Experiential Learning such as Action Learning and Communities of Practice (Merriam and Baumgartner, 2020, pp. 149-167; McGill and Beaty, 1995). Knitted into the threads of Nannagogy are critical educational gerontology; Ecofeminism; and Craftivism in the 21st Century.

Critical educational gerontology locates later-in-life learning as more than the functionalist, medical or deficit models that cast older adults on a trajectory of disengagement, decline, decreased capacities and ultimate frailty of both body and mind**.** In fact, in **terms of the psychology of older learning Findsen and Formosa (2011, p. 63) conclude t**here is ‘sparse empirical evidence on the relation between age related brain changes and late-life learning’ and ‘it is difficult to isolate the distinct processes involved in late life learning since the latter relies on multiple cognitive skills which emerge from a complex interaction of multiple brain systems.’ Further, that successful later life learning depends on ‘a wide repertoire of cognitive resources and brain structures that work on their own as well as interacting with one other’. Overall, it is not yet possible to arrive at definitive answers to the effects of ageing on later life learning. Learning continues throughout old age even where there are physiological and psychological barriers. Certain factors ‘may even give older learners an edge over younger peers’ such as: the integrity and accumulation of knowledge and abilities acquired throughout one’s life (i.e. crystallised intelligence), and ongoing ability for curiosity and making meaning from new information (ibid, p. 75).

Active citizenry and social inclusion are of greater significance to older learners. Older people have a significant role to play as ‘citizens capable of being reflexive and knowledgeable to critique societal norms and practices’ (Beck cited in Findsen, 2018, p. 844). Additionally ‘social movements (for example, Greypower; the peace movement; environmental groups) may provide further opportunities for elders to actively engage in authentic learning to improve their life chances’ as well as contributing to meaningful social change (Sutherland and Crowther, 2006, cited in Findsen, 2018, p. 844).

Attempts have been made to name specific methodologies pertaining to educating older or elderly adults ‘who are generally post-work and post-family, and sometimes frail and with intellectual limitations’ (Findsen and Formosa, 2011, p. 99). It is acknowledged that access to meaningful learning contributes to wellness and quality of later life (Boulton-Lewis, 2011; Field, 2011; Boulton-Lewis and Buys, 2015). Concepts of learning in the ‘third’ and ‘fourth’ ages are attempts to distinguish learner needs by their degree of activity, dependency and presumed frailty (the frailer being fourth age). However, recent research challenges the inherent ageism of elder as frail and therefore inconsequential preferring to replace it with opportunities for agency and dignity (Kydd et al, 2018, pp. 115-130).

# Critical educational gerontology and policy implications of climate change impacts and the human rights of older persons

I have considered the implications of climate change impacts and the human rights of older persons in terms of critical educational gerontology as it applies to the inclusion of older person’s expertise and leadership in educative climate justice activism.

As briefly described in the first section, I am focussed on the nature of older people’s learning through later life as learner-centred, collaborative and empowering in validating older people’s experiences, enhancing their self-esteem through mutual respect for one another’s intelligence, skills, talents, and abilities. A feature of KNAG structure is that it is informal, non-hierarchical, connected through social media and flexible which engenders a supportive community of practice. Women encourage one another to work within their capacities and feel free to vary involvement without consequences. This takes account of health, age and stage. This is a fluid and characteristically feminist approach (see Garner, 1999).

From my literature review I have ascertained that there is insufficient research into the area of critical educational gerontology (also referred to as critical ‘gerogogy’ or ‘geragogy’). What is clear to me from insights so far in my research is that not only do older people bring untapped capabilities (knowledge, expertise and wisdom) to climate change activism they are also highly motivated and easily learn the science of climate change and details such as implications of fossil fuels on global warming. Thus they become champions and credible voices for evidence-based information dissemination. My evidence is based on older women’s experiences and I do not presume this is the same for older men. Older women are more likely to be intolerant of the imposition of sexist and ageist attitudes having reached elder hood and more often than not a time of freedom from work and family obligations they see this as their time to fully engage in their passions.

From my research, being retired and older was seen as an opportunity to choose how to spend one’s time freed from responsibilities of employment and family commitments i.e. care giving, child rearing, home maker roles. Nannas range in age from 45 to 84, the majority are 50 to 74 (88%, 61 Survey data 2017, 67 responses) and typically over half were retired (i.e. 54% n=30 out of 56 responses). Retirement, not being in paid employment or having part-time work enabled women to have the time for their activism. This is related to ‘doing one’s bit’ by being able to be actively involved and a sense of contributing in a meaningful way as this survey quote shows,

[The KNAG movement has grown quickly because of …] The interest and concern, particularly with older KNAGs. They have retired and now have the time and support from other like-minded women. The KNAGs come along and whammo! that's how we can do our bit. (Survey Respondent 2017 #2)

Old women protesting with other old women sends a strong visual image of concern for future generations and shows how the Nannas connect with intergenerational climate justice through their actions,

We have more time than most people today, and we have seen the effects of poorly planned decisions regarding the environment etc., and we can clearly see what is happening to our planet and have a very strong sense and need to protect our grandchildren and try and keep the planet in some sort of healthy state for all future generations. (Survey Respondent 2017 #21)

A strong sense of meaningful active aging was important for many. Women described the knit-in tactic as, *a great fun and effective way* (S.26) of showing their concerns. Determination to not let physical limitations constrain involvement to purposeful retirement and being able to use one’s professional skills was how this Nanna expressed it,

I've always been involved in social justice issues as a result of being a teacher of adults. It's helped me come to terms with retirement. I have worthwhile causes and feel passionate about making a difference. Didn't think I'd be able to make much of a difference when I stopped working. Nanas have the time, the passion and the staying power because their families have grown and they no longer have work pressures to deal with. (Survey Respondent 2017 #55)

The exponential growth of an older women’s movement such as the Knitting Nannas in Australia indicates there are many who are already mobilised and ready to enter the broader social movement when a form of activism that suits their specific age and stage is available. My research is identifying that the group dynamics of inclusion and support typified by KNAG Loops enables creative and effective community engagement in climate action for intergenerational justice i.e. actions towards leaving the world better for future generations.

Much of this thinking relates to the expertise and leadership that older people can offer. I am concerned that provision of relevant information and ‘education’ without qualifying what that entails is not sufficient. The generally used terminology of ‘education’ which in practice means awareness raising and public information campaigns misses the mark. It does not constitute or consider actual situated experiential adult learning. This is an opportunity to include a right for older people to be supported by mechanisms for grassroots innovation and volunteerism whereby older persons collaborate and learn together about the specific effects of climate change on their immediate communities. Further, that they be supported in gaining intergenerational engagement in the development of local strategic action plans aimed at capacity building for resilience and adaptive preparedness for known and potential impacts of climate change. Community-based climate action groups for elders could be auspiced through for example - environmental NGO’s, local government, the U3A movement. This would be designed for a twofold effect of climate action and increased social inclusion for our elders thus contributing to healthy ageing. See Kent (2016, p. 9-10) for discussion of grassroots climate action groups.

# Recommendation

With this in mind, I suggest an additional ‘right’ i.e. the right to quality later-in-life learning opportunities that foster greater understanding of the learning needs and interests of older citizens who are concerned for the future ecological and economic sustainability of their immediate communities in the face of climate change challenges. My research is indicating that older people because of their life experience are likely to be adept at intuitively managing their own experiential situated learning by forming climate action groups (CAGs). Once formed as either part of a larger movement or in autonomous collaboration, older people can be encouraged and given resources to lead and/or participate as stakeholders in the development of local and regional community-based action plans for resilience and adaptation.

References

Boulton-Lewis, G. (2011). Issues in Learning and Education for Ageing. In G. Boulton-Lewis & M. Tam (Eds.), *Active ageing, active learning: Issues and challenges* (Vol. 15). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Netherlands.

Boulton-Lewis, G. M., & Buys, L. (2015). Learning choices, older Australians and active ageing. *Educational gerontology, 41*(11), 757-766.

Field, J. (2011). Lifelong Learning, Welfare and Mental Well-being intro Older Age: Trends and Policies in Europe. In G. Boulton-Lewis & M. Tam (Eds.), *Active ageing, active learning: Issues and challenges* (Vol. 15). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Netherlands.

Findsen, B. (2018). Learning in Later Adulthood: A Critical Perspective. In M. Milana, S. Webb, J. Holford, R. Waller, & P. Jarvis (Eds.), *The Palgrave international handbook on adult and lifelong education and learning*. London, UK: Springer.

Findsen, B., & Formosa, M. (2011). *Lifelong learning in later life: A handbook on older adult learning*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Garner, J. D. (1999). Feminism and Feminist Gerontology. *Journal of Women & Aging, 11*(2-3), 3-12. doi:10.1300/J074v11n02\_02

Hall, B., Turay, T., Chow, W., Dragne, C., & Parks, E. (2006). State of the field report: Social movement learning [Electronic version]. *University of British Columbia*.

Hall, B. L., & Clover, D. (2005). *"Social Movement Learning”* Oxford: Pergammon.

Kent, J. (2016). *Community action and climate change*. Oxon, UK: Routledge.

Kluttz, J., & Walter, P. (2018). Conceptualizing Learning in the Climate Justice Movement. *Adult Education Quarterly, 68*(2), 91-107. doi:10.1177/0741713617751043

Kydd, A., Fleming, A., Gardner, S., & Hafford-Letchfield, T. (2018). Ageism in the Third Age. In L. Ayalon & C. Tesch-Römer (Eds.), *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism* (pp. 115-130). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Larri, L., & Whitehouse, H. (2019). Nannagogy : Social movement learning for older women's activism in the gas fields of Australia. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 59*(1), 27-52.

Larri, L. J., & Newlands, M. (2017). Knitting Nannas and Frackman: A gender analysis of Australian anti-coal seam gas documentaries (CSG) and implications for environmental adult education. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 48*(1), 35-45. doi:10.1080/00958964.2016.1249325

McGill, I., & Beaty, L. (1995). Action Learning in Practice. In: Kogan Page, London.

Merriam, S. B., & Baumgartner, L. M. (2020). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*: John Wiley & Sons.

Scandrett, E., Crowther, J., Hemmi, A., Mukherjee, S., Shah, D., & Sen, T. (2010). Theorising education and learning in social movements: environmental justice campaigns in Scotland and India. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 42*(2), 124-140. doi:10.1080/02660830.2010.11661593

1. See <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/09/why-women-cannot-be-spectators-in-the-climate-change-battle/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)